

## Handout 1 - History of Guitar Distortion

### “Rocket 88”

On a late winter day in March 1951, a carful of teenage musicians headed toward their first recording session in Memphis, Tennessee. Short on space inside the vehicle, the band had tied much of their equipment to the roof, including their guitar amplifier, which at one point came loose and tumbled to the ground.

Upon setting up at the recording studio, the band’s guitarist, Willie Kizart, discovered that the fallen amp still functioned, but his plugged-in guitar sounded distorted and “fuzzy.” There were no other amplifiers to use, and the excited young men weren’t going to let a technical malfunction ruin their day. They recorded anyway, fuzzy guitar and all.



The session produced “Rocket 88,” often considered the first Rock and Roll recording, and Kizart’s “distorted” guitar was an essential component. Engineered by Sam Phillips at his Memphis Recording Service studio, the song was released via Chicago’s Chess Records label and quickly became a hit for the band, Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What **city** and **state** did the band travel **to** for their recording session?
2. What was the **name of the recording studio** where the band recorded?
3. What was the **name of the audio engineer** who recorded the band?
4. What was the **name of the band’s guitarist** who’s distorted tone made Rock and Roll history?
5. What were the **circumstances** that allowed the guitarist to achieve his particular guitar tone?
6. What **record label** released the recording? Where was the **label located**?

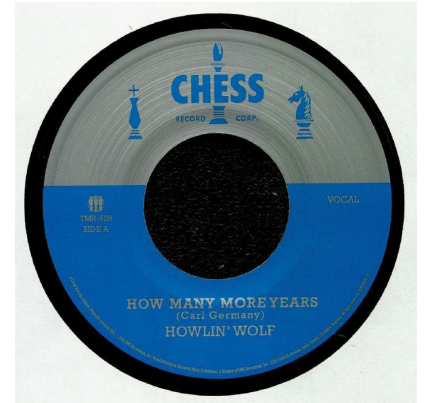
### Mapping activity:

Please find the location of the Memphis Recording Service on your mapping software:

1. 706 Union Avenue, Memphis, TN 38103

## “How Many More Years”

In July 1951, blues legend Howlin’ Wolf and his band traveled from their native Mississippi to Sam Phillips’ Memphis Recording Service studio in Memphis, TN. The band recorded the song “How Many More Years” with Phillips as the engineer, and guitarist Willie Johnson provided some snarling six-string guitar work. Johnson’s growling guitar tone was achieved by pushing the limits of his amplifier’s volume toward the brink of destroying the speakers, creating a seriously fuzzy sound.



“How Many More Years” was released on Chicago’s Chess Records and became a hit. While the songs’ success primed listeners’ ears to the sound of distorted guitar, it would be several years before this byproduct of frazzled equipment would become a defining feature of Rock and Roll.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What **state** did Howlin’ Wolf’s band travel **from** for their recording session?
2. What **city** and **state** did Howlin’ Wolf’s band travel **to** for their recording session?
3. What was the **name of the recording studio** where the band?
4. What was the **name of the audio engineer** who recorded the band?
5. What was the **name of the band’s guitarist** who’s distorted tone made Rock and Roll history?
6. What were the **circumstances** that allowed the guitarist to achieve his particular guitar tone?
7. What **record label** released the recording? Where was the **label located**?

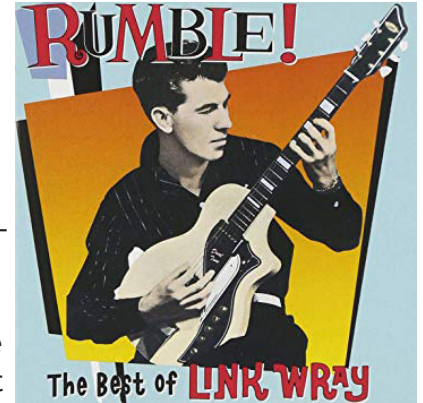
### Mapping activity:

Please find the location of the Memphis Recording Service on your mapping software:

1. 706 Union Avenue, Memphis, TN 38103

## “Rumble”

Released on Cadence Records in 1958, Link Wray’s instrumental song “Rumble” was created during an impromptu jam at a show in Fredericksburg, Virginia. As the song came to life onstage, the show’s audience worked itself into a frenzy. Seeking to hear Wray’s guitar over the din of the excited crowd, a microphone was placed in front of his amplifier. The instrument crackled with distortion as it blasted through the venue’s public address system.



Later, on the recording session for the song, Wray couldn’t get that same sound. He grabbed his amp, punctured the speakers, plugged in, and let it rip. It worked. Wray’s amplifier emitted a distorted growl, conjuring up the sonic spirit heard when the tune first lurched into existence. Although banned from airplay in certain markets out of concern that the track would inspire teenage delinquency, the song was a hit.

“Rumble” helped define the sound of the electric guitar, and to many, Wray’s distorted chords instilled a menacing spirit in the emerging Rock and Roll persona. As distortion became a sought-after guitar sound in Rock and Roll, the ability to reliably reproduce the effect without breaking equipment had to be achieved.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What **city** and **state** were the band performing in when “Rumble” was created?
2. What were the **circumstances** in which “Rumble” was created?
3. What was the **name of the guitarist** who’s distorted tone made Rock and Roll history?
4. What were the **circumstances** that allowed the guitarist to achieve his particular guitar tone?
5. Why was the **song banned from airplay** in some places?
6. What **record label** released the recording?

### Mapping activity:

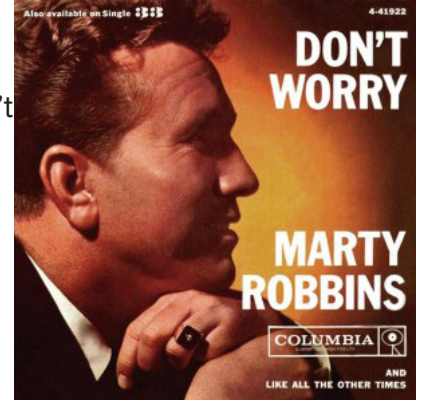
Please locate the following address on your mapping software:

1. Fredericksburg, VA 22401

## “Don’t Worry”

In 1960, Nashville recording engineer Glenn Snoddy was working with Country artist Marty Robbins when a strange sound filled the studio. Snoddy noticed that guitarist Grady Martin’s solo on Robbins’ song “Don’t Worry” was distorted due to a damaged component in the mixing console. The guitar’s tone was fuzzy.

Inspired by the experience, Snoddy and fellow Nashville audio engineer Revis Hobbs developed and patented a prototype distortion effect box. They sold the design to the musical instrument company Gibson, who marketed it as the Maestro Fuzz-Tone guitar pedal. The Fuzz-Tone, however, failed to catch on until the pedal got into the hands of a member of the Rolling Stones.



### Discussion Questions:

1. What was the **city** and **state** where the recording session took place?
2. What was the **name of the recording engineer**?
3. What was the **name of the guitarist** who’s distorted tone made Rock and Roll history?
4. What were the **circumstances** that allowed the guitarist to achieve his particular guitar tone?
5. What did the **recording engineer do** to replicate the guitar tone?
6. What **company** purchased the invention?

### Mapping activity:

Please locate the following address on your mapping software:

1. Music Circle South, Nashville, TN 37203

## “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”

During the Rolling Stones’ Spring 1965 U.S. tour, the musical instrument company Gibson furnished the band with amplifiers and a couple of Maestro Fuzz-Tone guitar pedals. When the Rolling Stones were in Los Angeles, they recorded their next single, “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.” Rolling Stones guitarist and songwriter Keith Richards used his newly acquired Fuzz-Tone pedal to record the tune’s iconic single-note guitar hook. The song was an immense success and brought distorted guitar to the ears of a global audience. Encapsulated in a pedal, now the menacing Rock and Roll spirit that distortion conveyed was available to all with the push of a button.



### Discussion Questions:

1. What **city** did the Rolling Stones travel **to** for their recording session?
2. What was the **name of the guitarist** who’s distorted tone made Rock and Roll history?
3. What were the **circumstances** that allowed the guitarist to achieve his particular guitar tone?
4. What was the **name of the device** that the guitarist used to get his distorted tone?

### Mapping activity:

Please locate the following address on your mapping software:

1. 6363 Sunset Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90028